

Leigh Desmond Ahern

14 December 1951 – 7 February 2009

Leigh Ahern and his wife Charmian died defending their Steels Creek home in the Victorian bushfires of 7 February 2009. Leigh's life was a testament of dedicated, thoughtful, ecological and conservation work, based in, but not bounded by, science as he sought effective ways to nurture community involvement in conservation. Leigh was born in Ringwood and attended local Government primary and secondary schools. He went on to study at La Trobe University, where he majored in Zoology, and graduated with BSc (Hons) in 1974. Leigh's honours research project was on the White-footed Dunnart *Sminthopsis leucopus* at Sandy Point, Western Port. It remains a seminal study of this little-known mammal. Leigh began work at the then National Museum of Victoria (NMV) in March 1975. He married Charmian Nathanielsz in January 1977 and together they enjoyed a loving relationship centred on their children, pets and home in the bush adjacent to Kinglake National Park.

At the NMV, Leigh worked in the Biological Survey Department where he studied the limnology of Gippsland rivers and how it might be affected by proposed dams. He also worked with Alan Yen in pioneering studies of the invertebrate fauna of leaf litter in eucalypt and pine forests. Some of us first really got to know Leigh when he was recruited to the Fisheries and Wildlife Department's Wildlife Survey Team at Arthur Rylah Institute in Heidelberg—on 6 February 1978. The Survey team spent several years in the Gippsland bush, working in rotating pairs, systematically surveying the flora and fauna as part of the Land Conservation Council of Victoria's reviews of the use of Crown Land across the State. Out in the bush on two-week field trips we all developed a comradeship with Leigh.¹ In this 'bush apprenticeship'—lugging Elliot and cage traps, spotlighting deep into the night, up early to clear the traps then conducting bird and reptile surveys through all weather—Leigh's breadth of knowledge, thoroughness and his basic compassion for both the bush and humanity inspired all of

us. Any field data marked 'LDA' was the gold standard of those times.

Leigh and Chris Belcher were quickly dubbed 'the Robur twins', in reference to their fondness for a cuppa brewed in a billy over the campfire at any opportunity. Leigh was also an accomplished musician and singer and beguiled the team on more than one occasion with folk songs. Over subsequent years, phone conversations might be peppered with reminiscences like '... remember the Moroka trip ... don't go back ... it's been clear-felled'. Leigh's capacity to remember in detail events from those far-off wildlife survey days was phenomenal and this capacity for recall must have added greatly to the value of his subsequent environmental writings and advocacy.

Back in the office, pinned near Leigh's phone, was an illustration of the differences in canine length of the vespertilionid bats. Leigh had carefully annotated the Victorian Public Service classifications under each species—the longer the fangs the higher the classification! That was Leigh at his driest: humour befitting the cartoonist Leunig, and which was open to everyone's view, be it the Minister or work colleagues.

Leigh moved from research into Wildlife Management where he was the key driver in establishing the first authoritative list of Victorian threatened species; he actively contributed to many threatened species projects on birds, mammals and invertebrates. Leigh showed his breadth of knowledge of fauna when he took on the position of convener of the Eltham Copper Butterfly Working Group.

Again ahead of his time, Leigh worked closely with the Bird Observers Club in devising and establishing the *Land for Wildlife* program within the Victorian Government, an innovation that has significantly improved off-reserve conservation and habitat management throughout Victoria. It has since been adopted by several other States, but alas, is now sadly neglected in its home State, for reasons that are unclear.



Leigh and Charmian Ahern

In December 1995 when threatened with relocation to the city, Leigh left the Department to establish a consultancy, Nature Scope, and to work from home in his beloved Kinglake bush. Here he continued his work at conserving Victorian landscapes, leading and authoring the cutting-edge bio-regional conservation plans. Leigh also took on other work to keep in contact with fellow scientists. He enjoyed a short period of work at the Museum in the late 1990s when he was employed to assist the late John Coventry to pack the herpetology collection for its move from the Abbotsford annexe to the new museum site in the city. Leigh was also employed by the Museum to prepare a list of Melbourne wildlife that formed the basis of the Museum book, *Melbourne's Wildlife*. He also undertook field work for the Museum during this period, including a trip with John Coventry to Queensland, and a trip to Uluru with John Wainer. In 2005, Leigh was employed by the Department of Primary Industries in a major project to translocate a population of Giant Gippsland Earthworms (which he believed should be named the 'Gippsland Giant Earthworm' to be grammatically correct) that

was threatened by realignment of the South Gippsland Highway. This translocation work stimulated his interest in the giant earthworm and he eagerly accepted the role of field assistant on many 'Gippsland Giant Earthworm' projects over the next three years. Leigh was also involved on field work associated with the Parks Victoria box-ironbark thinning experiment near Bendigo.

To everyone who worked with him, Leigh was a practical, thoughtful field worker with a keen, dry sense of humour. When undertaking the laborious tasks of field work—digging holes searching for giant earthworms, washing Elliot traps or cold and fruitless spotlighting—one could not want for better company. His knowledge of the land was amazing and he had an uncanny ability to engage landowners and make them feel at ease. He 'connected' and was always fascinated in those little things around him; his astute observational skills contributed to the breadth of his knowledge and compassion. An unidentified contraption of steel left abandoned in a paddock would hold his attention for ages as he studied it in an attempt to understand its use and its history. He would not

let go until he was satisfied with its origins, even if it meant researching it once he got home.

Leigh's breadth of knowledge extended well outside the area of natural history, and he joined the Yarra Glen and District Historical Society in 2000. He became an active member and applied his editing skills to the local history records of other members. Between 2003 and 2007, Leigh edited eight small books on recollections of life in Steels Creek, Tarrawarra, Yarra Glen, the Maroondah aqueduct, and the Healesville-Yarra Glen rail service and stations. These books were also published as CDs. He was working on other historical books at the time of his death.

Over this time, Leigh published more than 30 scientific, policy and popular reports and papers in the literature, including a number in *The Victorian Naturalist* (see bibliography). He was a member and supporter of the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria of many years' standing.

In October 2007 the Government appointed Leigh as a member of the Scientific Advisory Committee under the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act*, where his wisdom and expertise on Victorian vertebrate fauna and terrestrial communities of flora or fauna and potentially threatening processes added to the committee's breadth and depth. More recently, Leigh had been invited to be a member of the Australian Natural History Medallion Award Committee. Unfortunately the conflagration of 7 February 2009 cut tragically short the continuance of Leigh's contribution to the Victorian community.

Leigh dedicated his life and career to protecting the natural beauty of Victoria and showing us how to 'live' with it and within it. It is a tragic irony that fire—one of the drivers of our landscape, yet potentially one of the 'terrors' of this wide brown land—took his life, and that of his beloved Charmian. They will both be sorely missed by all who knew them. Leigh and Charmian are survived by Dale and Chloe who made the most excellent choice of parents, and by grand-daughter Charlotte.

¹ In the Fisheries and Wildlife Department Research Branch of the times, budgetary constraints meant a choice between a winch or radio—a winch on 'the Tojo' made us self reliant, not needing to 'bother' local Forests Commission officers with radio contact. (The 1970s were a long way from

current OHS requirements.) The camaraderie of those times was reinforced as Leigh knew we were bringing a new ethos, based on ecology, to the forested landscapes of Gippsland for Victorians to re-evaluate land-use and management. Over many two-week field trips, 10-14 hour days were spent trapping, spotlighting, observing and recording—no overtime requested or offered, but the campfires, the occasional surf, the freedom, excitement and importance of the 'work' infected Leigh and us all.

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